

SOME LESSONS FROM VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA

The appeal of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, the prime epic of India, is many-sided. This characteristic of the epic stems out of its extent, age and theme. In about 25,000 sweet, simple and mellifluous verses, it is an extensive repository of information on a vast number of subjects, touching, practically, every facet of life in ancient India about two millenniums ago. Thus, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an authentic source of information to students of history, geography, sociology and politics, on the one side, and of religion, literature and the arts, on the other. It has been a perennial source of inspiration to poets and dramatists who wrote in Sanskrit and the several regional languages of the land. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* told and retold, generation after generation, to young and old, in original and in redaction, has had, all along, a sustaining value, which, perhaps, no other similar work possesses in equal measure.

While the idealist « *theme* » of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has served to entertain and educate the common man in India, in different strata of the society and stages in life, there is much in Vālmīki's « *words* » which is more often than not missed in its redactions. Attention is drawn, below, to one such aspect of Vālmīki's « *Text* », viz., the rich store of wise sayings of everyday utility to the common man of today. These sayings generally take the form of advice, admonitions, statements of worldly wisdom, vagaries of life, ways of the wise etc., to suit all conceivable situations. In this lies the utilitarian value of these sayings. For, from these one can draw inspiration, get guidance and confirm one's conviction in his actions. The specimens noticed below will make explicit this aspect of Vālmīki's composition.

To start with some healthy advice towards self-development: The *Rāmāyaṇa* enjoins one to be ever active: *bhava kriyāparo nityam*

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(4.20.17). One should act in time, for a dam is not built after the water has flown down (*gatodake setubandho na vidhīyate*, 2.12.17). Moreover, one who does not set to work himself, but depends upon fortune, will soon lose everything and will be on the run:

*yas tu nārabhate kiñcin naro daivaparāyaṇaḥ /
kṣīpraṃ bhavati nirdravyaḥ palāyanaparāyaṇaḥ //*

(5.32.12)

During times of danger, the brave should think coolly and act firmly:

*vyasane vārthakṛcchre vā bhaye vā jīvitāntage /
vīmrśan vai svayā buddhyā dhṛtimān nāvasidati //*

There is no question of despair and one should never drown oneself in sorrow at times of distress:

samprāpya paṇḍitaḥ kṛcchraṃ naiva śoke nimajjati /

Vālmīki counsels patience and assures happiness in due course to one who would bide his time. He says:

eti jīvantam ānando naraṃ varṣaśatād api /

(5.28.8)

A brave man should never speak foul even in strained circumstances:

kaṣṭhāyam apy avasthāyām na dhīro garhitam vadet /

(3.50.20)

He should not give way to anger, for, men of character do not indulge in it: *kopaṃ niyacchanti sattvavantaḥ* (5.52.16). Moreover, there is no saying as to what an angry man would do or say:

nākāryam asti kruddhasya nāvācyam vidyate kvacit /

(5.55.6)

Vālmīki indicates the three-fold functionaries of evil, viz., the body, mind and tongue:

*kāyena kurute pāpaṃ manasā sampradhārya ca /
anṛtaṃ jihvayā prāha trividham karma pātakaṃ //*

(2.101.21)

He also warns that bad results are sure to follow evil acts:

avaśyaṃ labhate kartā phalaṃ pāpasya karmaṇaḥ /

(3.34.8)

The path to a peaceful life is to avoid the extremes of likes and dislikes:

na cātipraṇayaḥ kāryaḥ kartavyo'praṇayaś ca te /

(4.16.121)

Indeed, distress results from possessive love, and much more so from hatred and, so, those who can avoid both deserve credit:

*priyād utpadyate duḥkham apriyād adhikaṃ punaḥ /
tābhyāṃ hi ye viyujyante namas teṣāṃ mahātmanām //*
(5.20.68)

Neither is emotional intensity beyond limits justified, for, after all, man is born single and is also to make his exit in a similar manner. This being the case, who is possessed by whom and what has he to do with him, asks the author:

*kaḥ kasya puruṣo bandhuḥ kiṃ kāryaṃ kena kasyacit /
yad eko jāyate jantuḥ, eka eva vinaśyati //*
(2.121.3)

Coming together of persons, wife, children, friends and wealth, is no more than like the coming together of logs of floating wood in the watery expanse, jostling together for a while and floating apart later:

*yathā kāṣṭhaṃ ca kāṣṭhaṃ ca sameyātāṃ mahodadhau /
sametya ca vyapeyātāṃ sthitvā kiñcit kṣaṇāntaram /
evam bhāryās ca putrās ca suhrdaś ca vasūni ca
sametya vyavadhīyante dhruvo hyeṣaṃ vinābhavaḥ /*
(2.119.12-13)

There are, however, certain positive ideals to be lived for and there are proper means to achieve them. First and foremost, one should cherish his Self: *Ātmā rakṣyaḥ prayatnena* (5.46.15), the means for which is righteousness (*dharma*). From righteousness flows wealth, happiness, everything; the entire universe is, indeed, the essence of righteousness:

*dharmād arthaḥ prabhavate, dharmāt prabhavate sukham /
dharmena labhate sarvaṃ, dharmasāram idaṃ jagat //*
(3.10.25)

To be righteous, to be good, is not to tolerate evil. Goodness might be of little avail herein and so evil shall have to be put down with a firm hand. The *Rāmāyaṇa* enjoins:

*na sāma rakṣassu guṇāya kalpate
na dānam arthopaciteṣu varīate /
na bhedasādhyā baladarpitā janāḥ.*
(5.38.3)

« Words of goodwill will have no effect on demons; there can be no gifts acceptable by the wealthy; and, those mad with pride cannot be moved by threats ». Punishment alone shall have effect on the wicked.

The words of worldly wisdom, both approbatory and deprecatory, found in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, can come in handy to one to take a lenient view

of the vagaries of the erring mortal, but, at the same time, to correct oneself. Thus, Vālmīki notices that man is drawn (into wrong-doing) by his senses, just as an elephant tied by ropes:

indriyaiḥ kṛṣyate jantuh sūtrabaddha iva dvipaḥ.

(4.16.60)

Few, indeed, are people who tender benevolent, though unpalatable counsel:

apriyasya ca pathyasya vaktā śrotā ca durlabhaḥ.

(6.16.21)

For, as the poet himself observes:

mumūrṣūṇām hi martyānām yat pathyaṁ tan na rocate /

(3.59.21)

« Good counsel is not appreciated by those men who are intent to do away with themselves ». Vālmīki has a very telling illustration for this trait of his mundane fellow beings. He observes, sarcastically, that a son might fling at his own mother who attempts to give him benevolent, though unpleasant counsel; however, when his sweetheart addresses the same words to him, he is all smiles! ».